

Straight-talkin' and 'Blue Dog' tough, Rep. Gene Taylor was on the ground before, during and after Katrina.

By Ryan LaFontaine - The Sun Herald/Associated Press, April 17, 2006

A day or so after Katrina surged through this town, rescuers in boats and helicopters were frantically searching for survivors, chaos spreading fast amid crippled communication.

A man in tattered khaki shorts, not a hair in place, approached a Coast Guard officer for a rapid exchange outside the county's still-soggy emergency command center.

"What are you doing here?" the disheveled man asked, grabbing the officer's arm.

"We have a few boats in the water down by Casino Magic, and we're just waiting for an order," the officer replied, obviously having little idea who the bedraggled questioner was.

Wearing a mud-stained T-shirt and deck shoes, U.S. Rep. Gene Taylor began ripping map pages from a Coast phonebook, circling places where he thought chances of finding survivors still existed.

"Go here, and here, and maybe here," Taylor said. "And tell them you have an order from a United States congressman."

Frustration and confusion consumed South Mississippi for days after Katrina, and a month later Taylor was still fuming.

"I was there, and I don't recall seeing you," he told former FEMA Director Michael Brown at a Capitol Hill hearing.

A few months later, he set up tents to show Washington reporters what many in South Mississippi were still living in because of the sluggish response from the federal government

and its contractors tasked with delivering temporary travel trailers to the state.

Taylor even suggested the government fashion a national registry for insurance executives, "just like the one we have for sex offenders, because I think people should know if they're living next to one."

The Taylors had flood insurance on their turn-of-the-century cottage in Cedar Point, a part of town leveled by Katrina, but he was one of the first in Congress to push for a federal bailout for uninsured homeowners, with a plan to allow them to retroactively buy into the National Flood Insurance program.

Taylor, 52, has since shifted his focus from rescue to recovery to joining a lawsuit against insurance companies to rebuilding his own home on days off.

The Democratic congressman said his life in politics has always been about helping people, but never have hundreds of thousands of people needed his help the way South Mississippians did, and in many ways, still do.

"After the storm, so many people who normally ask very little of their nation were now looking at losing everything, and they needed our help," Taylor said over a couple of Cokes one morning at Benigno's.

It was June 1971, the peak of the antiwar movement. Washington was crawling with protesters demanding an end to the Vietnam War, and Gene Taylor had just graduated from De LaSalle High School in New Orleans.

The many movements of the 1960s and '70s did not sway the easygoing teenager who grew up fishing South Mississippi bayous on the weekends. He joined the service.

His 13 years in the Coast Guard on a search-and-rescue boat was perhaps what made it seem easy for him to hand out phonebook pages and give orders after Katrina.

Taylor knows a thing or two about saving lives; he once received a Letter of Commendation for saving the life of a Coast Guard officer who fell overboard after a fire broke out on the boat. Taylor jumped in the water after the officer to save him.

Shortly after he was married and graduated from Tulane University with a degree in political science, Taylor and his wife, Margaret, moved to Bay St. Louis.

By the early 1980s, he had two young daughters and a full-time job as a salesman for a corrugated box company. It wasn't long before Taylor got the public service itch.

He sought the advice of Pete Benvenuti, a long-time member of the Bay St. Louis City Council, who lived just a few streets over. Taylor said he wanted to know what it would take to win a City Council election.

"The best advice Mr. Pete ever gave me, and really the best career advice anyone has ever given me, was to hit the street," Taylor said. "The idea was to knock on as many doors as possible."

The door-to-door knocking and constant phone calls made for a time-consuming effort that nearly cost him his job at the box company, but it paid off. He won a Bay City Council seat in 1981.

Councilman Jim Thriffiley, who was elected in the 1970s and is still serving today, said government captivated Taylor.

"He wanted to know everything there was to know about how government worked," Thriffiley said. "Gene would spend hours researching information to make sure we did things correctly.

"And, he was very consistent; if he said something today, you could count on him saying the same thing tomorrow."

Less than two years later, Taylor was again asking his boss for time off. This time his eye was on the state Senate.

He was by then juggling a family and city government with another passionate effort to win an election and a full-time sales job.

"I felt sure they were going to fire me," Taylor said. But the box manufacturer stuck it out, and their salesman was elected to the state Senate in 1983.

Five years later, then-U.S. Rep. Trent Lott left his seat in the House to become a U.S. Senator, and Taylor hit the campaign trail hard, hoping to beat Larkin Smith and fill the open seat.

Taylor lost and the box company mistakenly thought their salesman's days of campaigning were over. A few months later, Smith died in a plane crash.

"I sat down with my boss, and he said I had a choice to make," Taylor said. "He would give me a paid, six-month leave of absence to run in the special election, but if I lost, I could never run for anything again."

Taylor won, ending one sales career and beginning another, now in its 16-year-and-counting run in Washington.

When Taylor is home, constituents see him as a humble, simple man who enjoys fishing on weekends and announcing the play-by-play of the crab races during the annual OLG Crab Fest.

On weekends before Katrina, he would cruise the beach or run to the hardware store -- not in a new SUV, but in his rusty and very modest 1990 Ford Ranger. He had driven the truck for 11 years, and after a while, Taylor said, it had a way of growing on you.

"It was the best kind of truck there is: It was paid for," he said. "I would have driven that thing until the wheels fell off."

Thinking it would be safe during the Aug. 29 storm, he parked the truck on Carol Avenue, along with an old 8-foot boat his parents gave him about 40 years ago. The truck was trashed, but he recovered the boat a few days later.

For Taylor, most of the past 16 years have been spent out of the country or in Washington, flying back on weekends to spend time with his family.

His son, Gary, now 17, was a toddler when Taylor was elected to Congress, but ever since the boy was big enough to hold a rod and reel, the two have made father-and-son fishing trips a priority.

"This is all Gary has ever known," Taylor said. "We would block out one weekend a month for me to take him fishing.

"When he was younger it was hard on him, but now, I think he certainly understands, especially when he drives around and sees all the people here who need our help."

When he is in Washington, Taylor spends a lot of his free time with his daughter Emily, 24, who works for a real estate company.

His oldest daughter, Sarah, 27, was married in May and lives in New Orleans. The day after Sarah's wedding, Emily announced her engagement and a tentative wedding date for August.

It was an exciting time for the Taylors, but for a father considered by his colleagues one of the most fiscally conservative Democrats in Washington, the news of not one, but two, pricey weddings in less than 48 hours did not come easily.

"That was the most expensive weekend of my life," Taylor said. "And to top it off, I dropped a pretty expensive outboard motor overboard that same weekend."

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